



Healthy Advice



If you're more worried about airborne viruses than computer viruses, your PC can help.

Martin Cooper looks at medical self-help websites and sorts the healthy from the harmful

On the internet, everyone is an expert. Do a Google search for Austin Allegros and you'll doubtless find pages of sage advice about how to mend this, do that and adjust the other so you can keep your classic relic rolling along. The same is true of just about every sphere of interest and endeavour – someone online will claim they know all the answers to even the most obscure and esoteric enquiry. This is all well and good when you're looking after an old car, fault-finding in Windows or trying to work out why the leaves keep dropping off your begonia, but when it comes to your health the stakes are very different.

The internet is groaning with opinions and alleged facts about illness and cures. But are they to be trusted? Might you do yourself more harm than good? In this feature, we delve into the world of medical self-help, answering these questions

and more. And you can rest assured we've done our research. Where possible, we've take advice from real experts, including the British Medical Association, NHS Direct and Pfizer.

DIRECT ACTION

There are many different ways of accessing NHS healthcare. You can go to a hospital or make an appointment to see your GP, and you can also use NHS Direct. This gives patients access to medical knowledge and advice from home.

In the main, NHS Direct exists as a telephone-based service. If you're feeling unwell, you just dial 0845 4647 and get through to a nurse. They may be able to give you some basic advice that could sort you out. If they don't feel they can, they can arrange for a doctor to telephone you back, or they may tell you to head straight to hospital. The great advantage of the service, from a patient's point

of view, is that professional, trustworthy and free medical advice is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And you don't need to travel to get it.

NHS Direct also has a comprehensive website at www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk. There you'll find a mine of information about many aspects of illness. Along with this huge database of information, which we will discuss in more detail shortly, you might like to check out the Send us your enquiry section (you'll see the link in the left-hand column of options). Here you can send an email to NHS Direct and, within five working days, you should receive a helpful message in return.

We must point out that if you suspect you have something very serious, ring NHS Direct or seek immediate medical attention. The phone service isn't suitable for people who have an as-yet undiagnosed complaint, feel their treatment isn't working or need counselling or even a diagnosis.

HOW TO AVOID BAD ADVICE ON THE NET

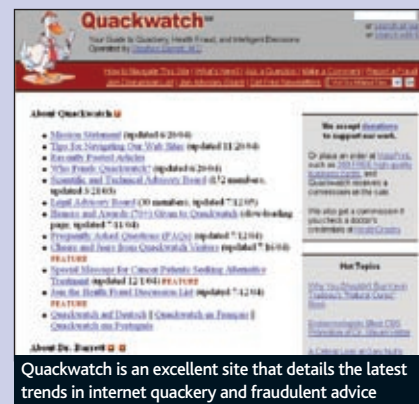
The medical sites we've recommended here are a mere drop in the ocean when put in the context of all the self-help web pages available on the internet. So how can you ensure that a website that looks slick and sounds plausible is giving you the best advice?

The *British Medical Journal* (www.bmj.com) has published a wealth of research on the subject, including a fantastic document written by Dr Paul Cundy, chairman of the British Medical Association's IT committee, detailing practical tests you can take to discern a site's honesty and correctness. To read the full and unabridged version, visit the *British Medical Journal's* website. Here is a brief summary of the guide:

- Never rely on information from just one site. Where possible, cross-reference your findings with other articles, ideally published by trusted scientific journals.

- Looks for the author's credentials and also for other published work.
- Ensure the site is updated regularly.
- Look for advertising and links to commercial sites. Who is backing the site you're looking at? Might this cause a conflict of interest?
- Look for a balance of opinion and avoid highly opinionated views on single themes.
- Be wary of anything that criticises or disparages anyone or anything.
- Look for evidence of an editorial board, as these tend to engender a variety of views.
- Just as on the high street, avoid anything that claims to provide miracle cures.
- Think twice before posting or sending information to sites and check their stated approach to privacy and confidentiality.
- Look for contact addresses on the site, as these are signs that an organisation exists in bricks and mortar.

- Finally, it's well worth keeping an eye on www.quackwatch.org. This is a website dedicated to exposing health-related fads, fakes and frauds on the internet.



Quackwatch is an excellent site that details the latest trends in internet quackery and fraudulent advice



BBC Medical Notes

WEB http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/medical_notes

The BBC's website contains a wealth of information about health issues. Its Medical Notes page contains an A-Z archive of common complaints, ailments and diseases. Click on one and you'll be taken to a page discussing it in more detail.

It's also worth keeping an eye on the site for Radio 4's *You and Yours* (www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/youandyours), which regularly discusses medical issues. If you missed a show you can use the page's Listen Again feature to stream the programme over the internet.



Doctor Foster

WEB www.drforster.co.uk/home.aspx

Dr Foster describes itself as "an independent organisation which collects and analyses information on the availability and quality of health services in the UK". The site is generally approachable and has a helpful glossary to explain medical terms.



Malehealth.co.uk

WEB www.malehealth.co.uk

Malehealth.co.uk is run by the Men's Health Forum, the UK's leading charity working to improve men's health. The site has a laidback and laddish style of writing that makes the advice it gives easier to swallow. For example, it advises you to "keep off evening caffeine – that means tea, coffee and hot chocolate. Have a nice camomile tea instead – even the sound of it makes me yawn – or a milky drink."



NHS Direct is a huge online resource of information for patients. It discusses illnesses, cures and many aspects of healthcare in plain and comprehensible English

Rather, it is limited to supplying information that you can't find on the NHS Direct website itself. If you find yourself in this position, give it a try. It's absolutely confidential, but is limited to residents of England only.

The NHS Direct website is so well constructed and written that you may not even need to use the telephone service. There is, for example, a clearly labelled health encyclopedia that, in our opinion, is one of the better ones available on the internet. To find a particular illness, click on the Health Encyclopaedia link in the left-hand panel of the site's front page. Click on the relevant letter and then on the name of the illness. That will take you to a separate web page, where you'll find a general introduction and links to areas such as diagnosis, treatment, prevention and so on.

Another useful tool is the site's guide to NHS services (again, this is an option on the left-hand side of the screen). Here you can enter your postcode and the site will generate a directory of dentists, doctors and pharmacies closest to your home. The information was retrieved in seconds when we used the site, and was clearly presented and structured.

We also liked the site's Interactive Tools. These take you through some common health-related decisions, such as giving up smoking, cutting back on alcohol, eating more fruit and taking more exercise. There's also an excellent section on pregnancy. Among other things, this section of the site also presents you with a 40-week calendar. Click on the week you're in and the site will produce a sheet detailing what's happening to the baby and its mother. It's a fantastic way of keeping informed about what's going on.



We really like NHS Direct's interactive pregnancy tool, which gives you a week-by-week appraisal of what's happening in the womb

Finally, if you're really struggling to find help or information about a particular topic, try the search option in the top right-hand corner of the website. Enter key words such as Vitamin C or scurvy and you'll be presented with a list of articles relating to your request.

Unlike some websites whose search features seem to throw up random articles about anything except what you've asked about, NHS Direct has created a very efficient and effective means of finding and presenting pertinent information. The site is made all the more impressive when you consider the size and dimension of the database that must exist behind the NHS Direct web pages.

LOOKING ELSEWHERE

NHS Direct isn't the only source of online medical help. There are some excellent websites that can give patients and carers insight into an illness. As we're only qualified to give an opinion about the design and function, we've chosen to look only at websites that have been explicitly recommended by the British Medical Association. Go to www.bma.org.uk/ap.nsf/content/healthinfo for a full discussion of its policies, views and recommendations when it comes to using the internet as a source of health advice.

HIRED HELP

If you search around the internet, you'll soon come across sites that purport to give you an online consultation with a qualified doctor. We contacted the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) and asked them for their opinions about how patients should approach these online surgeries.

CAN YOU TRUST ONLINE PHARMACIES?

Online pharmacies are big business and they're causing British medical and pharmacological institutions some real worries. There are perfectly legitimate and legal online pharmacies that operate in the UK. Like the pharmacy or chemist on your high street, these are regulated by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain (RPSGB). On the other hand, unscrupulous foreign-run websites exist that sell prescription-only drugs, copies of medicines and counterfeit products.

For any drug to be deemed fit for use in Great Britain it must be approved by the Medicines and

Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). This body has real concerns about bogus sites and, more specifically, the supply of unapproved lifestyle drugs such as growth hormones for body builders, slimming pills and Viagra-style drugs. It warns that the supply of such drugs is illegal and that many of them are harmful and, in some cases, life-threatening. A Milton Keynes man was recently prosecuted for selling the Indian Viagra copy Kamagra on eBay.

Consumers who are concerned as to whether a particular website is legitimate or not can contact the MHRA on 020 7084 2000.



Dr Alan Hassey, chair of the RCGP IT working group, told us: "The RCGP recommends that patients be extremely cautious about using online medical consultation services. To the best of our knowledge these are unregulated and there is no guarantee that patients would consult with appropriately qualified medical practitioners. Advice given by a foreign doctor might well be different from a UK doctor and may be inappropriate for the NHS or just plain wrong."

SHIFTING PERCEPTIONS

Towards the end of 2003, Pfizer published a report in which it claimed doctors were perceived by most people over 55 as the 'gatekeepers of health'. In its survey, only six per cent of people polled would consider the internet as the most useful source of medical advice. At the top of their list came GPs, who took 75 per cent of the votes. The survey may not be particularly scientific, but it does illustrate that the internet isn't trusted by many people.

Before researching and writing this feature, we would probably have agreed with the 75 per cent in Pfizer's findings. After spending time talking to medical bodies such as the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain (RPSGB), however, we feel differently.

The British medical establishment appears to be embracing the internet and is using it to deliver its healthcare messages and advice efficiently and safely. It is also acutely aware of the risks the internet poses to patient health and is researching, publishing and developing ways to combat these problems. The RPSGB, for example, is developing ways in which its regulatory umbrella, which has so far covered only bricks and mortar pharmacies, can be adapted to cover online chemists.

With all this in mind, we're positive about the internet's place in healthcare. However, if you're ever unsure or worried about what you read online, the best advice is to consult your GP. 

HOW THE NET CAN HELP YOU STAY HEALTHY

Prevention is better than cure. What, beyond your apple a day, can you do to ensure you're a stranger to the doctor's surgery? If you're a smoker, the first thing you should do is kick the habit. One of the best online resources for anyone thinking of doing so is www.givingupsmoking.co.uk. It's a site run by the NHS, so you'll be able to trust the information there, knowing it's from an authoritative and honest source. As you can imagine, much of the information on the site about the health risks associated with smoking make for pretty frightening reading. If these aren't enough though to make you quit, the site states: "At today's rates, a 20-a-day smoker will spend £31,025 over the next 20 years." Just think what you could do with that.

When you've tackled tobacco, it's time to look at your alcohol intake. To help you find out if you're drinking too much, visit www.bupa.co.uk/health_information/asp/healthy_living/lifestyle/alcohol/alctest.asp. There you'll find an interactive calculator that will let you discover exactly how many units of alcohol you are consuming by entering the number of pints, spirits and cocktails you consume in a week. When you've completed the weekly diary, the site will present you with a figure in units. There are also some guides detailing what alcohol really does to our minds and bodies. Sadly, it's not good.



There are plenty of sites that can help you to kick the nicotine habit

You can also visit www.downyourdrink.org.uk/main.php. Though light-hearted in its approach, it is run by Alcohol Concern and the NHS. The site includes a six-week course that aims to help you reduce your drinking. The program is designed to help you cut down on alcohol, and it's completely anonymous.

There's little point cutting out booze and fags and still indulging in a double cheeseburger every day. To begin assessing your diet and working out what you need to change, visit www.healthyliving.gov.uk. This site is run by the Scottish NHS and is packed with information and healthy recipes. It's also worth checking out www.5aday.nhs.uk, the official site of the government campaign to encourage people to eat five portions of fruit and vegetables a day.

Finally, if you need to lose some weight, you can find lots of help online. Unfortunately this area of health is infested with online quacks (see www.quack-watch.org), but there are some trustworthy sites. Start your search by visiting www.bupa.co.uk/health_information/asp/healthy_living/lifestyle/diet. Once more, the Scottish NHS has some sensible and practical advice on its site at www.hebs.scot.nhs.uk/learningcentre/obesity.



You'll find some very useful articles and interactive tools on BUPA's website

Patient UK

WEB www.patient.co.uk

Run by two GPs, this site is full of advice with links to a huge number of other sites and sources of information. You'll find over 681 leaflets on health and disease. Most GPs in the UK use these same leaflets to print out for patients and carers during consultations. There are also details of 1,967 patient support and self-help groups, along with comprehensive information about medicines and an online pharmacy.



Best Treatments

WEB www.besttreatments.co.uk

Best Treatments' information comes from Clinical Evidence, the *British Medical Journal's* worldwide survey of the best, most up-to-date medical research, used by doctors everywhere. The site is completely unbiased, non-commercial and won't try to sell you anything.



Social and Healthcare Electronic Portal

WEB www.sherpa.nhs.uk

Run by the NHS, this huge site provides access to many sources of information on evidence-based healthcare, including *Bandolier*, a journal about evidence-based healthcare, the Centre for Evidence-based Dentistry and the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme. Some of the information is primarily of use to health professionals, but many of the resources are aimed at patients, too.

